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Northern Alaska Environmental Center
Conservation's Northern Voice

August 23, 2004

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Northeast NPR-A
Amendment Planning Team Leader
222 W. 7th Avenue, #13
Anchorage, Alaska 99513-7599

RE: Comments on the plans to amend the Northeast NPRA Integrated Activity Plan and Environmental Impact Statement

1 Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments during the public scoping meetings for the revised Integrated Activity Plan and Environmental Impact Statement for the Northeast National Petroleum Reserve Alaska (NPRA, or Reserve) held by the U.S. Department of the Interior (Interior) Bureau of Land Management (BLM) throughout October 2003. While the Northern Alaska Environmental Center recognizes the area has special status as a petroleum reserve, we are deeply concerned about the management of this 4.6 million acres of public land and the future of America's Arctic.

2 The Northern Alaska Environmental Center is the nation's most northerly, broad-spectrum environmental advocacy organization, based in Fairbanks. Founded in 1970 by a concerned group of Interior Alaska conservationists, the NAEC boasts a membership of 1,150. We work on conserving Alaska's stunning natural resources by advocating management and stewardship policies that promote sustainable, responsible practices. Central to these efforts are conservation and not preservation; a commitment to work with all Alaskans; and, above all, public education.

3 Our concerns are outlined in the attached memo. The Northern Center would like to continue to be included in future discussions about the NPRA.

Sincerely,

Kelly Hill Scanlon
Arctic Coordinator



Northern Alaska Environmental Center

Conservation's Northern Voice

TO: Northeast NPR-A Draft EIS

FROM: Northern Alaska Environmental Center

DATE: August 23, 2004

RE: Comments on the draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Northeast NPRA

4 Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) for the Northeast plan of the National Petroleum Reserve Alaska (Reserve). The Northern Alaska Environmental Center recognizes the special status of the NPRA as a petroleum reserve for the United States. However, we also contend that BLM is required by Congress to manage the NPRA in a manner that preserves its biological, ecological and cultural integrity, as well as for its petroleum potential. Indeed, we feel it is in the US public's interest that these 4.6 million acres of public lands be managed with these twin objectives in mind. On that basis, we submit these comments.

5 Generally, we believe that the cumulative impacts posited in the 1998 NE plan need to be revisited and reassessed, as we contended in our 1998 litigation on the NE NPRA EIS. The comments below do not deal with that higher-order concern but rather address specific aspects of the current SEIS in regards to the alternatives it provided as well as areas of special considerations that are of concern to the Northern Alaska Environmental Center (NAEC).

ALTERNATIVES

006 Cumulative As the nation's steward of this region it is incumbent upon BLM to examine all facets of exploration and the long-term impacts it might have on the natural and cultural resources in the area under consideration. Therefore, a full review of the 1998 plan should be undertaken by BLM, prior to any changes made to the NE Reserve plans

007 Alternatives Alternative A—the No Action Alternative--keeps the 1998 plan in place, even though it inadequately addresses the protection of critical habitat in the NE. The 1998 plan relied heavily upon new drilling techniques to ensure environmental protection. In the six years since the ROD on the NE Reserve, oil exploration and drilling techniques and technologies have not advanced enough to render the plan obsolete---but many of the techniques assumed to be of importance are still in the developmental stage. The critical habitats in this area of the Reserve should not fall victim to these unproven tactics; hence the need for a full review of the 1998 document

8 Moreover, Alternative A already permits approximately 4 million acres (or 87%) available for leasing. This area contains 600 million barrels of recoverable oil, while providing considerations for many regions of critical habitat.

COMPARISON OF BLM NPRA PLANNING EFFORTS

009 Stips & ROPs Recently, the BLM released a ROD for the NW Reserve. This ROD calls for weaker, more discretionary stipulations than the original NE ROD. In revising the NE plan to include stipulations similar to those in the NW BLM fails to explain how it will meet its obligations to protect wildlife and other values in the Reserve. Specifically, the public needs to see how BLM addresses several issues: how performance-based measures will be implemented; the effectiveness of the stipulations in the NW; and what format the Alpine Satellite Development will take.

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DEVELOPMENT ANALYSIS

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Drilling proponents regularly boast that “new technologies”, such as ice roads and directional drilling, will provide the means to drill in the sensitive Arctic in an “environmentally responsible” way. However, those new technologies are often impractical or uneconomical in the Arctic. As a result, real drilling activities on the North Slope entail more permanent gravel roads, an increase in drilling platforms all resulting in more disruption to the ecosystem. BLM’s development analysis should take these oil development realities into account in its review process. Concurrently, the impact of development on non market-value resources (such as subsistence hunting) should be studied with an attempt to realistically quantify its economic, social and cultural impacts. The results of such a study may dictate that alternatives with more protective measures than Alternative A should be considered.

PROTECTED AREAS

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The National Academy of Sciences National Research Council (NRC) March 2003 report *Cumulative Environmental Effects of Oil and Gas Activities on Alaska’s North Slope* confirms that oil and gas drilling has had profound impacts on the North Slope region’s natural and human environment. Those effects stretch far beyond the immediate footprint of the industrial complex itself, and are having lasting cumulative impacts on the land, water, people and wildlife of America’s Arctic. In the slow-healing arctic environment, some of these changes may persist for centuries.

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Cumulative

The NRC report illustrates the inadequate and superficial nature of the cumulative effects analysis completed in the 1998 NE Reserve FEIS. That SEIS states BLM must adequately determine and describe the potential long-term cumulative effects of oil and gas development on wildlife, ecosystems processes, as well as the cumulative social impacts on residents. This analysis must include a discussion of the impacts from potential activities on adjacent state land, private lands as well as state and federal offshore leases in the Beaufort Sea. BLM has yet to effect this analysis.

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Monitoring

Neither does BLM recognize that the Reserve is already undergoing significant change. As a result, the SEIS erroneously leaves no permanently protected areas that scientists can use to set ecological benchmarks. It will not be possible to discern the effects of development, climate warming and other problems and changes, absent areas free of industrial influence.

Teshkepuk Lake

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The Teshekpuk Lake Special Area was designated by the Secretary of the Interior in 1977, because it encompasses highly vulnerable and important habitats for many Arctic wildlife species, including many species of waterfowl, caribou, and marine mammals. Alternative A has left 87% of the Northeast Planning Area available for leasing while protecting the high value waterfowl and caribou habitats, largely in the Teshekpuk Lake Special Area. Under this exemption, a mere 600,000 acres (including the Lake and areas north and east of the Lake) are exempt from oil and gas leasing. Just 240,000 acres south, west and east of the Lake are exempted from surface activity.

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Considerable public input was solicited for the 1998 FEIS at meetings and workshops around the state and public comments were factored into the final decision to create this Special Area. Although the NAEC believes the 1998 decision does not go far enough in protecting key areas within the NE, there was strong national support for the areas BLM did set aside. There is no evidence that supports reversing those protections now. On the contrary, NAEC believes there is more evidence in favor of increasing protections.

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Subsistence

It is not only the public’s opinion that must be included: so too must scientific research that shows that caribou rely on the Teshekpuk Lake Special Area during calving for the high nutritional value of its vegetation. The Teshekpuk Lake Caribou Herd (TCH) lives in the area and will be adversely impacted if oil and gas exploration are allowed in this area. So, too, will be affected the communities dependent upon them. These communities include Nuiqsut, Barrow, Atkasuk, Wainwright and Anaktuvuk Pass. Indeed, according to Alaska Department of Fish and Game

biologists, North Slope villages harvest between 2500-3000 Teshekpuk caribou per year. This can be compared with an annual harvest of 300-500 caribou of the Arctic caribou herd. Sustaining a harvest of this scale requires a high level of productivity. Any change in that productivity level, whether directly related to industrial complexes in the area, or other industrial encroachments on the calving areas, will significantly impact herd survival, subsistence hunting activities and villages dependent upon the herd.

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Teshekpuk Lake also provides caribou with critical insect relief areas. The herd must be able to move between the coast and inland during high insect periods. Oil and gas development could impede this movement and impact the overall well being of the herd.

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Finally, the area north of Teshekpuk Lake is an important nesting and molting area for waterfowl. According to the 2003 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service data, approximately 20,000 molting black brant use the area each year, although this number varies considerably from year to year¹. The area is also an important to the survival of white-fronted geese. In 2002, approximately 35,000 white-fronts were counted there. Additionally, many species of geese, ducks, swans and other birds use the Teshekpuk area for nesting.

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Teshekpuk Lake

It is unclear what new scientific evidence has been produced that will show how development can occur around Teshekpuk Lake without seriously harming wildlife and subsistence use. Such evidence should be included in detail in the SEIS.

Colville River

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The Colville River Special Area also was recognized by the Secretary of the Interior in 1977, and protection for it and its resources should be maintained. The Colville River is the largest of Alaska's rivers that flow to the Arctic Ocean. It is best known for its remarkable densities of birds of prey, including Arctic peregrine falcons, gyrfalcons, rough-legged hawks, and golden eagles. The intact habitat of the Colville River played a key role in the recovery of the Arctic peregrine falcon, which was removed from the list of North American endangered species in 1996. The Colville and its tributaries also provide the most diverse and abundant habitat for moose, brown bears, wolves, wolverines, and at least twenty species of anadromous and freshwater fish. It is a vital source of subsistence for area residents and is a spectacular scenic area with tremendous recreation values for remote, wilderness experiences.

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The Colville River is historically significant, as well. Along the lower reaches of the river, at Ocean Point, current have exposed important and productive dinosaur finds. The Ocean Point and Liscombe bone-beds are one of the northernmost Cretaceous deposits in the world and may help to answer questions about dinosaur extinction and historical climate changes.

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Planning

BLM continues to treat the planning of the Colville River Special Area in incremental steps, despite a unanimous recommendation from the Alaska Resource Advisory Council (RAC) to the Secretary of the Interior in 1998 to complete a watershed plan for the entire Colville watershed. This piecemeal planning approach will lead to unacceptable adverse impacts on the unique values of the area. BLM must address these inadequacies in the SEIS.

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More detailed information on the natural resource values of both the Teshekpuk Lake Special Area and the Colville River Special Area can be found in Audubon Alaska's December 2002 report *Alaska's Western Arctic: A Summary and Synthesis of Resources*. The report was submitted to BLM at the time of its publication and should be on file.

¹ In 2001 the number was as high as 36,000 birds. This is about one-third of the entire black brant Pacific flyway population.

STIPULATIONS

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The existing NE Reserve stipulations for mitigating impacts from oil and gas development are insufficient to protect surface resources. These stipulations were based on the premise that they must not adversely affect the viability of potentially commercial discoveries. To create maximum incentives for oil and gas producers, BLM included provisions that could be modified and waved—thus rendering the stipulations meaningless.

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Stips &
ROPs

Now BLM proposes to further weaken these stipulations by removing many mandatory minimum restrictions and replacing them with vague standards. These are subject to abuse, as they come under the influence of profit-oriented petroleum executives. The SEIS must contain scientific evidence proving that further modifying and/or waiving the already weak NE stipulations will provide adequate environmental safeguards. Specifically, the SEIS must address the issues highlighted by the NRC report on winter travel, seismic, restoration, groundwater and water withdrawals.

RESEARCH AND MONITORING TEAM

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Research

The 1998 Record of Decision (ROD) for the Northeast Plan explicitly directed creation of a Research and Monitoring Team (RMT) to advise and coordinate research and monitoring projects related to effectiveness of stipulations and surface resource impacts. The formation of this RMT was put on hold in spring 2003. BLM must justify this decision relative to compliance with commitments made in the ROD.

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Moni-
toring

Monitoring of resources and activities within the NE Plan Area has been very limited with no coordination with the RMT. The BLM must describe how they met the monitoring commitments documented in the 1998 FEIS and ROD and how these will be continued in the future. Absent the RMT, BLM must detail how it intends to conduct long-term monitoring that includes biological control areas within the NE Plan Area.

CONCLUSION

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The ecological integrity of the North Slope is at serious risk from poorly planned, piecemeal and damaging development as envisioned in the revised NE Reserve SEIS. Those effects stretch far beyond the immediate footprint of the industrial complex itself, and could well have lasting cumulative impacts on the land, water, people and wildlife of America's Arctic

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The Northern Alaska Environmental Center seeks effective protection for the nationally and internationally recognized wildlife habitats, wild rivers, cultural resources and wilderness found in the Reserve. The most biologically rich and recognized wildlife and wilderness values of the region are not yet permanently protected. A balanced approach to the management of these natural resources is needed to protect the most sensitive areas and cultures.